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Birchot HaTorah: Beginning Our Learning With Tefillah

Every morning, after Netillat Yadayim and Asher Yatzar, we proceed to recite Birchot HaTorah, thanking Hashem for the opportunity and privilege to study His Torah. Today, we will take a closer look at the structure of these brachot and explore the deeper message they are meant to convey.

Gemara Nedarim offers a fascinating insight into the importance of Birchot HaTorah. The Gemara teaches that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because the people of that generation did not recite Birchot HaTorah before learning Torah. This seems difficult to understand. Why would such a terrible punishment result from what appears to be a relatively minor omission?

The **Mishna Berura** explains that their failure to recite Birchot HaTorah was symptomatic of a much deeper problem. The people of that generation learned a great deal of Torah, but they had forgotten *why* they were learning. Torah had become an intellectual pursuit rather than a means of developing a relationship with Hashem.

The **Bach** similarly explains that the

people used their Torah learning to show off to others how learned and righteous they were. What they had forgotten was that the ultimate goal of *Limmud Torah* is for a person to grow in *ruchniyut* and develop a deeper connection with Hashem.

This gives us a deeper appreciation for Birchot HaTorah. Before we begin our Torah learning each morning, we take a moment to remind ourselves what Torah learning is really about. Torah is not simply knowledge to acquire. It is meant to shape us, change us, and bring us closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

The **Mishna Berura** therefore emphasizes the importance of saying Birchot HaTorah each day and using these brachot to establish the proper perspective toward our Torah learning. Before we open a sefer, we remind ourselves that our learning is meant to help us build our relationship with Hashem.

STRUCTURE

There is a debate in **Gemara Brachot** regarding the wording of Birchot HaTorah. Three different Amoraim offer different formulations, and our siddur reflects a combination of all three.

לעסק בדברי תורה 1.

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recited before performing a mitzvah. Before beginning our Torah learning for the day, we recognize that we are about to engage in a mitzvah that Hashem has commanded us to perform.

The wording is significant: לְעִסֵּק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה - to engage in the words of Torah. The word לעסוק suggests more than simply studying or acquiring information. It implies immersing ourselves in Torah and making it an integral part of who we are. This first bracha focuses on the effort that we need to put into our Torah learning.

2. והערב נא

וְהָעֶרֶב נָא ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ אֶת דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָתְךָ בְּפִינוּ וּבְסִפּוּי עֶמְךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְנִהְיֶה אֲנִיחוּ וְצִמְצִמֵינוּ. (וְצִמְצִמֵינוּ) וְצִמְצִמֵנוּ עִמָּךְ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל. כָּלֵנוּ יוֹדְעֵי שְׂמֶךְ וְלֹמְדֵי תוֹרָתְךָ לְשִׁמְחָה: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַמְלִמֵּד תוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל:

We then ask Hashem to make the words of Torah sweet to us, and not only to us, but to our children as well. In this bracha, we ask for *Hashem's help* to feel connected to our Torah learning and to pass that enthusiasm and passion on to our children. This is not a simple task, particularly in today's world. We therefore need to have real kavanah when saying this bracha, recognizing that it is only through tremendous *siyata d'Shmaya* that we can successfully inspire ourselves and our children with a love of Torah.

3. אשר בחר בנו

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל

הָעַמִּים וְנָתַן לָנוּ אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'. נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה

In the final bracha, we praise Hashem for choosing us as the nation to receive the Torah. We recognize not only the importance of Torah in our individual lives, but also the way Torah shapes us as a nation.

There is a beautiful progression in these three brachot. First, we recognize our personal responsibility to engage in Torah. Then we ask Hashem to make Torah sweet and meaningful not only to us, but to our children. Finally, we acknowledge Torah as the unique gift that Hashem has given to Klal Yisrael as a whole.

After reciting Birchot HaTorah, we make sure to immediately engage in some actual Torah learning. We do this by reciting selections from three different areas of Torah, each highlighting a different aspect of the importance and impact of Torah learning:

Birchot HaTorah

Saying **Birchot HaTorah** gives us the correct perspective on daily basis, reminding ourselves that the goal of our Torah learning is to build our relationship with **הקב"ה**.

Rav Soloveichik explains that the reason we only say **Birchot HaTorah** once a day, is because the Torah remains constantly on our mind throughout the day. Just like a mother doesn't forget her children when she goes off to work, so too, the Torah should become such a part of us, that even when we are dealing with other mundane tasks, it is always there, shaping who we are, how we act, and what we do.

✂ Cut and paste into your siddur



Torah – Birkat Kohanim: The Midrash Rabbah explains that the words *יְאִיר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ* refer to Hashem illuminating our eyes and hearts through Torah — *שִׂיְאִיר עֵינֶיךָ וְלִבְךָ* — בתורה. **Mishna – A list of mitzvot whose performance has no limit:** This list includes the mitzvah of Torah learning, highlighting that there is no limit to how much one can engage in this mitzvah.

Beraita – A list of mitzvot whose reward is received in Olam Haba: The passage concludes with “וְתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה דְּנֶגְדָּךְ גָּלוּם”—that the reward for learning and teaching Torah is equivalent to the reward of the entire list.

Together, these three passages emphasize the central role of Torah: it enlightens us, offers limitless opportunities for growth, and stands at the heart of our Avodat Hashem.

THE MESSAGE

Rav Soloveitchik asks an interesting question. Normally, we recite a bracha before each individual mitzvah. For example, If a person washes his hands for bread several times throughout the day, he recites *Al Netilat Yadayim* each time. So why do we recite Birkhot HaTorah only once in the morning, even though we may learn Torah many times throughout the day? Rav Soloveitchik answers that although we do not literally study Torah every moment of the day, Torah should remain constantly on our minds.

He compares this to a mother who goes to work but does not forget her children. Even while occupied with other responsibilities, her children remain in her thoughts.

Similarly, Torah should become such an integral part of us that even when we are engaged in mundane activities, it continues to shape who we are, how we behave, and the decisions we make.

In that sense, we are עוסקים בתורה throughout the day, even when we are not physically sitting and learning. Our Torah learning should not remain confined to the time we spend with a sefer. It should accompany us throughout the day, shaping who we are, how we act, and ultimately, our relationship with Hashem. ■

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